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Political Uses of Memory and the State in Post-communism

ALEXANDRU GUSSI

Over the past twenty-five years, the debate about the communist past became largely a discussion about the debate itself. In this paper, I will argue that, in the immediate aftermath of the events of 1989, the main concern of the public actors was not to clarify the nature of the old regime, but to assess its specific elements, to condemn them and/or to forget them. Such processes were perceived to be the perquisites of embarking on the project of building a new democratic state¹.

From the very beginning, many politicians and analysts confused the social necessity of memory, but also of forgetting, with the political use (if not manipulation) of these natural feelings. Subsequently, more often than not, the need to achieve political power and to have access to material resources overshadowed the interest for a sustained archeology of the past. Nevertheless, the narratives of the communist past² remained an essential element for the understanding of political cultures in post-communist Europe³. I state in this article that the new identities of political parties, civil society, intellectual circles and schools, and even of new nation-states after 1989 have been fundamentally rooted in the discursive and representational processing of the communist (and not only) past. From this perspective, the attitude towards the past was inextricably linked with the gradual development of democracy and pluralism⁴. We can say that remembering the communist past was a ritual

¹ The main ideas of this article was presented at the conference "Remembrance, History, and Justice: Coming to Terms with Traumatic Pasts in Democratic Societies", Washington DC, 11-12 November 2010 and a version of this text will be published in a collective volume edited by Vladimir Tismăneanu and Bogdan Iacob at Central University Press.

² I analyze the narratives of communist past and the political use of memory of the communist period as part of the relation between political identities and the political discourse on the recent past inspired by works like Henry ROUSSO, *Le syndrome de Vichy 1944-1987*, Seuil, Paris, 1987 and Marie-Claire LAVABRE, *Le fil rouge. Sociologie de la mémoire communiste*, Presses de la FNSP, Paris, 1994. For the theoretical approach see also Serge BERSTEIN, "Introduction. Nature et fonction des cultures politiques", in Serge BERSTEIN (ed.), *Les cultures politiques en France*, Seuil, Paris, 1999, pp. 7-31; Henry ROUSSO, "La Seconde Guerre Mondiale dans la mémoire des droites françaises", in Jean-François SIRINELLI, *Histoire des droites en France*, vol. 2, Gallimard, Paris, 1992, pp. 550-660.

³ For Vladimir Tismăneanu: "Left, right, center: all these notions have strange and elusive meanings under post-communism. Using interpretative Western paradigms would simply create false analogies and would explain little, if anything", Vladimir TISMĂNEANU, "The Leninist Debris or Waiting for Peron", *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 10, no. 3, Fall 1996, pp. 504-535/p. 504.

⁴ For Geoffrey Pridham: "National identity expresses a basic form of collective experience, while parties are important as agents for transmission, but also transmogrification of historical memories", Geoffrey PRIDHAM, *The Dynamics of Democratization. A Comparative Approach*, Continuum, London and New York, 2000, p. 35.

that could "serve political organizations by producing bonds of solidarity without requiring uniformity of belief"¹.

At the same time, it was almost impossible to depoliticize the question of the totalitarian legacy. Across the entire former socialist bloc, deliberate politics of forgetting and biased politics of memory contributed, in different ways, to collective feelings of frustration among individuals living in post-communist societies. Resentment, however, fluctuates along a wide array of social categories, from victims of the communist regimes to collaborators of the various secret police agencies. Regardless, if one was a perpetrator, fellow traveler, a bystander, or a member of those sections of the population that experienced direct and targeted repression, everybody needed to understand, in different ways obviously, what kind of historical and political experience they have been through. Though motivations might be in radical contrast, all members of a former communist society revealed a certain urge toward some kind of closure.

The political instrumentation of collective memory undermined a significant part of the moral weight that the recourse to such mechanism potentially brings forth. Consequently, those societies judged the communist past almost exclusively from the perspective of the political and economic context. In this aspect, one could categorize post-communist states on the basis of the relationship between their capacity to condemn the totalitarian past and the swiftness of their transition towards a democratic regime². My hypothesis is that the countries where the successor parties were not defeated in elections in 1989 or 1990, as it was the case in Romania³, Bulgaria⁴, and some other Balkan and ex-Soviet states⁵, these heirs of the former communist parties were able to "dissolve" into the state and maintain a more or less covert control over state structures⁶. Subsequently, the alternation to power, when such successor parties ultimately lost elections, could not change fundamentally this legacy of communist bureaucratic "conversion" originating in the early post-communist period. In other words, the democratic transition was often hindered by the interest of the

¹ David I. KERTZER, *Rituals, Politics and Power*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1988, p. 67.

² For Vladimir Tismăneanu "the new radical-authoritarian trends (often disguised as pro-democratic) in Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, and elsewhere, lingering reflexes and habits inherited from Leninist and pre-Leninist regimes authoritarianism continue to exist: intolerance, exclusiveness, rejection of all compromise, extreme personalization of political discourse and the search for charismatic leadership. These Leninist psychological leftovers can be detected at both ends of political spectrum", Vladimir TISMĂNEANU, "Leninist Legacies, Pluralist Dilemmas", *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 18, no. 4, October 2007, pp. 34-39/p. 35-36.

³ For Romania see Alexandru GUSSI, *La Roumanie face à son passé communiste. Mémoires et cultures politiques*, l'Harmattan, Paris, 2011, pp. 45-142.

⁴ For Bulgaria case see for example Romyana KOLAROVA, Dimitr DIMITROV, "Bulgaria", in Jon ELSTER (ed.), *The Roundtable Talks and the Breakdown of Communism*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1996, pp. 178-212, and Marta TOUYKOVA, "The Genesis of a Successor Party in Bulgaria", *Raisons politiques*, no. 3, Aug-Oct. 2001, pp.127-138/p. 130.

⁵ For post-communist Russian Federation see Kathleen E. SMITH, *New Russia Politics and Memory during the Yeltsin Era*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 2002.

⁶ In this sense, we can say that some state institutions acted as forms of counter-power, a role which the state may have in another context, as pointed out by Jean Louis QUERMONNE, *L'appareil administratif de l'État*, Seuil, Paris, 1991, p. 10.

ex-communists to block the access of anti-communist and democratic forces to real power over the state structures¹.

The assessment laid out above is obviously more of a background generalization. There is, of course, no uniform pattern. However, in the countries quoted above, when compared with Central-European states, we can notice, at the least, various symptoms of this feeling of lack of control of non-communist political leaders over state structures. In the Romanian case, two of these are more important. The first is the political instability that goes as far as claiming a "coup d'état". The second is the lack of a minimum consensus on condemning the crimes of the communist state².

One recent example, far from anecdotal, is provided by Vladimir Tismăneanu, who pointed out that the recent law which makes August 23 the Day for the Commemoration of the Victims of Fascism and Communism, and December 21 the Day of the Victims of Communism in Romania was simply ignored in 2013 by public authorities, even though it touched on an issue that was apparently on the public agenda during that time. Apparently, the blame could be laid exclusively on a lack of political will or on the continuity of the communist state. After more than 20 years, state bureaucracy is far from being monolithic, and the continued existence of the networks formed before 1989 can only partially explain what is going on. Our interest, however, is in line with the relationship between the society that tends to see the state as a whole, and the reality of that state, which, in relation with the past, becomes plural, we could say even contradictory. That is because there seem to be several policies of memory that are applied, based on narratives about the past that contradict each other. From this point of view, the analysis that do not start from the tension that exists within state structures between differing narratives on the communist past end up exaggerating the significance of an "official discourse" on the past, a discourse which cannot be reduced to a single narrative of the past. In fact, in Romania we cannot talk about a coherent official discourse about the communist period, which bewilders societies used with the state producing an official history. Within this logic, we can also understand the fact that there is a collective frustration within those segments of society which expected justice from the post-communist state.

Many researchers interested in the dynamics of post-communist societies notice this feeling of frustration experienced at large by the members of a traumatized society³. These societies discovered the limits of the removal of communism, and the lack of feasibility of lustration laws against the background of constitutional considerations intrinsic to the establishment of a rule of law. Similar reactions were triggered by the reality of the inability to implement measures concerning transitional criminal justice, that is, the difficulty in condemning those responsible for the crimes

¹ Romania is famous in this matter due to what the first post-communist president, Emil Constantinescu, said: "We won the elections, but not the power", expressing a feeling that I believe may be generalized in the cases quoted above. On this issue see Alexandru GUSSI, *La Roumanie face à son passé communiste...cit.*, pp. 213-228.

² In Romania, the 2006 condemnation of the crimes of communism was challenged by the Social Democratic Party, in spite of the fact that the latter never accepted the idea of any form of continuity with the Communist Party, see "Rezoluția Congresului Extraordinar al PSD în legătură cu folosirea trecutului ca armă politică din 10 decembrie 2006", www.psd.ro (accessed on December 12, 2006).

³ For example, see Lavinia STAN (ed.), *Transitional Justice in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union: Reckoning with the Communist Past*, Routledge, New York, 2009.

perpetrated throughout the existence of the communist regimes¹. The rule of law is based on the principle of non-retroactivity, and this became one of the main obstacles for anyone willing to legally condemn the former communist perpetrators. The latter, that is the victimizers and not the victims, benefited from the democratic principles against which they themselves fought their entire lives. After 1989, they reported a final victory against their adversaries. Craig Calhoun excellently diagnosed this phenomenon when he remarked that former communists understood that they "can use the language of democracy to ensure their future right to participate in the government, while invoking liberalism's limitations on state powers to safeguard themselves against future retribution"².

The social frustration is also a result of the lack of coherence of the anti-communist political leaders, who excelled in making glowing promises and in setting high expectations by invoking political reform built on moral grounds³. Upon coming into power, these elites broke their promises, thus seriously subverting the democratic frameworks of responsibility and of institutional accountability. Under these circumstances, one general phenomenon that can easily be noticed is that the past was selectively used as a weapon against adversaries, while simultaneously functioning as a mechanism to protect one's supporters. Unsurprisingly, such political instrumentation of the pre-1989 period contributed to an ever-ascending spiral of collective frustration⁴. Subsequently, nostalgia, on the one hand, anger, on the other hand, put under strain the very legitimacy of post-communist regimes⁵.

In the public space one can notice the coexistence of two opposing and separate types of discourses: that of indictment, which condemns the crimes of communism, and that of nostalgia, which goes so far as to use artifacts for advertisement on prime-time commercial television (for example, the region-wide trend to employ in advertisement some "classic" products from the "beautiful years" of the 1970s and 1980s). However, it is remarkable that we cannot find a correspondence between the pluralism of narratives of the past produced by the state and those most visible in the public sphere. Below we shall try to table an explanation for this phenomenon. In almost all post-communist countries we do notice the widespread expression of nostalgia toward communism that is not, at least for the moment, a political one, but rather a social one⁶. At the same time, nostalgia is also an inter-generational experience

¹ See Raluca GROSESCU, Raluca URSACHI, *Justiția penală de tranziție. De la Nurnberg la postcomunismul românesc*, Polirom, Iași, 2009.

² Quoted in Lavinia STAN, "Poland" in IDEM (ed.), *Transitional Justice in Eastern Europe...cit.*, p. 68.

³ For example, historian James Mark underlined that "the impulse to remember only developed with the growing perception in the mid-1990s that the former system had not in fact been fully overcome". See James MARK, *The Unfinished Revolution. Making Sense of the Communist Past in Central-Eastern Europe*, Yale University Press New Haven/London, 2010, p. xiii.

⁴ For a comparative analysis of the complex relationship between criticism against post-communist regimes and the attitude towards the communist past see Sergiu GHERGHINA, "Attitudes Towards the Communist Past in Five Central and East European Countries", *History of Communism in Europe*, vol. I, 2010, pp. 167-181.

⁵ For a study on lustration impact see Cynthia M. HORNE, "Assessing the Impact of Lustration on Trust in Public Institutions and National Government in Central and Eastern Europe", *Comparative Political Studies*, no. 20, 2011, pp. 1-29.

⁶ For this observation see Dominik BARTMANSKI, "Successful Icons of Failed Time: Rethinking Post-communist Nostalgia", *Acta Sociologica*, vol. 54, no. 3, 2011, pp. 213-231.

of selective, subjective bits of personal memory, which usually manifest themselves in the absence of a canonical condemnation of the totalitarian past. One cannot predict the effect, if any, of this nostalgia, when it comes to its appropriation by the political structures. Grigore Pop Eleches recently concluded that "to the extent that civic participation deficit is driven by the experience of having lived through communism, we have no reason to expect it to persist beyond the current generations"¹. Protests such as those in Sofia and Bucharest in 2013 seem to prove Pop Eleches right, which is significant, because we are talking about precisely the generations that have produced a new type of social nostalgia. At the same time, polls indicate that in Romania "oestalgia" is low among youth, and the more classical nostalgia is stronger than ever in the case of generations over 60 years of age. The tension between generations is an important element in the difficulty of producing social or political consensus around some form of relating to the communist past.

In Romania, the twenty year anniversary of the collapse of communism can provide an excellent exemplification of the above mentioned ambivalence, rooted in both the inability of political elites to adopt coherent policies in reference to pre-1989 times and the society's inability to own up to its past. This anniversary moment could have been highlighted and celebrated at the official level, but it actually passed with a whimper, as officials chose not to do so. They seemed to be still hampered by their embarrassment with their own past, which they once invoke with great zeal. At the same time, civil society commemorated the collapse of communism in its own way. Conspiracy theories were embraced with enthusiasm across the entire media spectrum. The symbols of the anti-communist revolution simply lost their power. How can one explain this transformation? Is this not, in the context of the economic crisis, a clear manifestation of the rejection of the post-communist systemic alignment?

In the Romanian case, the explanation can only start from the degradation of the significance of the December 1989 moment in society's eyes. Here we had a revolutionary form of change, but also a visible continuity both in the state bureaucracy and the political elite. If the first dimension of the fall of communism, the revolutionary one, is as visible as it granted legitimacy to the new rulers in 1989-1990, and for the new regime overall, the dimension of continuity is obscured by the former. However, the 24 years gone by thus appear as a long and successful challenge to the revolutionary dimension, and a strengthening of the dimension that highlights continuity. The central element here is the contrast between the two dimensions, which leads to a sharp decline in the capacity for granting legitimacy that the 1989 moment had. This process of degradation of the revolutionary moment's image can now be said to be the outcome of 24 years of collective *travail de mémoire*. We may even say that partisanship has degraded the image of the December 1989 moment to the point at which it turned from the symbol of a break with the communist past into the paradoxical symbol of continuity with it.

¹ Grigore POP-ELECHES, Joshua A. TUCKER, "Associated with the Past? Communist Legacies and Civic Participation in Post-communist Countries", *East European Politics & Societies*, vol. 27, no. 1, February 2013, pp. 45-68/p. 64.

The Paradox of the Relation of Post-communist States with the Recent Past

The paradoxical relationship with the past appears to have originated in the following situation: after 1989, the pluralist discourse coexisted with institutional and cultural mechanisms marked by the totalitarian experience. This tension was projected in the political sphere by roughly two camps that are in a competition on the basis of their sharply contrasting attitudes towards the communist past. After 1990, the state needed a form of negative legitimacy against its communist past. It was also a way of taking distance that was considered necessary for post-communist states in order to gain credit in the eyes of the West¹. This attitude toward the past also contributed to the birth of civil society inside the countries in Eastern Europe. Accordingly, many states formally declared themselves to be non-communist and democratic without, in fact, taking seriously widespread concern for policies aimed at removing communist state institutions. The identity of the new states was decisively shaped by their acceptance or rejection of a certain political memory. This is evident in the case of states belonging to the sphere of influence of the former Soviet Union².

Simultaneously, the main political parties, whether anti-communist or simply ex-communist, had to respond to the same injunction: to define themselves as post-communist and anti-totalitarian entities. In the background, of course, lay the question of a genuine separation from totalitarianism – at stake was the removal of communism. Initially, this was presented as a national objective, publicly proclaimed by all ex-communist states³. As the immediate aftermath of communism's collapse passed, the political debate mainly concentrated on the practical and symbolic ways of implementing such a program. After more than 20 years, one can legitimately wonder to what extent the political and social cleavage with the past was a truly radical one, as long as the goals of post-communist transitions were similar, while only the timing and the style of the political and social actors were different. Furthermore, if one is to adopt a "panoramic" view of the entire former Socialist bloc, the homogeneity of the trajectories of the post-communist states is striking. One cannot fail to notice that the methods used by the main political forces at the level of their social and economic policies were also quite similar. At least two inevitable questions beg answers: Was the rift over the past only artificial? Did it come about from a symbolic need?

It is true that sometimes the politics of memory were different, but again – looking at the big picture – we do not see great, unassailable differences in the respective relationships that societies from Central and Eastern Europe have with their communist

¹ As Katherine Verdery emphasized: "In Eastern Europe, rewriting history has been perhaps unusually necessary because of powerful pressures to create political identities based expressly on rejecting the immediate past. The pressures came not just from popular revulsion with communism, but also from desires to persuade Western audiences to contribute the aid and investment essential to reconstruction", Katherine VERDERY, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies. Reburial and Postsocialist Change*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1999, p. 52.

² Kathleen E. SMITH, *Mythmaking in the New Russia. Politics and Memory during the Yeltsin Era*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 2002.

³ For G. Pridham "the presence of regime alternatives to democracy depends very much on perceptions of the authoritarian past. Historically based anti-authoritarian attitudes continued to delegitimize a possible return to non-democratic rule", Geoffrey PRIDHAM, *The Dynamics of Democratization ... cit.*, p. 226.

past¹. The idea of the end of history, the attraction of and for the Western model, in parallel with the complete demise of the communist societal model, were such powerful realities in 1989 that, across the entire region, pluralism could come about as a result of the competition between political parties that either opted for a narrative centered on the truth about the past (or the need for revenge) or for official amnesia out of the fear of the removal of communist heritage. Consequently, the relationship with the past in its every aspect (condemnation, nostalgia, or reaction against too much of either) remained one of the main sources of mobilization in these countries. It is central to the definition of political identity, individual affect and societal symbols.

Compared to the German model of uncompromising condemnation of the Nazi past or the Spanish model of consensual oblivion², the countries in Eastern Europe provided a new model, structured on a top down trajectory, of *instrumental cleavage*. The latter was based on an impossible compromise (or consensus) over the past. The impossibility of compromise also functioned as one of the primary mechanisms that produced and legitimated ideological pluralism. The paradox lies in the fact that the ideological consensus over the type of the future society makes impossible the consensus over the means of condemning the old society.

In addition, because the "capitalist" model that everyone aspired to fundamentally excluded any form of anti-communist revolution or violent removal of communism, post-1989 parties did not have to take into account the risk of violence in the process of system building because apparently there was none, maybe with the exception of Romania and Albania. The risk of violence being low, both in terms of removal of communism and possible return to communism, these parties took the liberty to use and manipulate the politics of memory. Subsequently, society saw its grieving and mourning being confiscated by various political actors and by the state itself. The past (or better said the memory of it) then almost exclusively began to be perceived as an instrument for amassing partisan majorities of different political coloring. The result was that the state seemed to lose its credibility in facing the past, maybe with the exception of some moments of apparent consensus in the some of the countries of Eastern Europe.

This situation was a direct result of the encounter between the ruins of a type of totalitarianism that lasted over forty years with the ideal of a liberal democracy, for which Western institutions did not have a pre-prepared "recipe" for the East. At the same time, the West (either the European Union or NATO) had no intention of encouraging the so-called Nuremberg of communism. At the same time, decades of Soviet hegemony and the resilience of Leninist legacies³ limited the emergence of genuine internal resources, able to define the problems of the past in the terms of the rule of law.

¹ See Lavinia STAN, *Transitional Justice in Eastern Europe...cit.*

² For a broader comparative perspective see Paloma AGUILAR, Alexandra BARAHONA DE BRITO, Carmen GONZALEZ-ENRIQUEZ, *The Politics of Memory, Transitional Justice in Democratizing Societies*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002.

³ On Leninist legacies in Eastern Europe see Kenneth JOWITT, *New World Disorder: The Leninist Extinction*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1992; Anna GRZYMAŁA-BUSSE, *Redeeming the Communist Past: The Regeneration of Communist Successor Parties in East Central Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002 or Grzegorz EKIERT, Stephen E. HANSON, *Capitalism and Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe: Assessing the Legacy of Communist Rule*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003.

The fall of communism was an event lived simultaneously in the West and the East of Europe. This simultaneity produced the illusion of the existence of comparable mental patterns, and even the idea of a common memory. But memories were, then as they remain now, very different. Such a situation generated the fact that international justice did not work in the case of post-communism. It was considered that there were European courts and rules applicable. However, these courts defend the fundamental principles of liberal democracy. Therefore, individual responsibility and non-retroactivity could be used as arguments against the logic of lustration, inside and outside the judicial system. Europe seemed to tell Eastern Europe to forget the past, to ignore the possibility that the democratic identity of post-communist states could be founded on the condemnation of the crimes against humanity from their recent past¹.

Since the 1990s, the pro-democratic circles in the region regarded Western Europe as a political and social model, as well as a pressure factor for democratization process and guarantee for the stability of the political regime. The entry of the ex-communist states in the European Union validated this strategy, but that did come at a steep price. The cost was that the political balance artificially maintained with the purpose of achieving EU accession was broken in the immediate aftermath of ending this stage of post-communist evolution. With external political pressure lessened, the limits of democratization become apparent, especially at the level of the political sphere and in reference to state institutions. In this respect, the continuous crisis experienced by Romania after 2007 can hardly be considered an exception.

The Romanian Case – Exception or Prototype?

Romania is one of the most representative example from among Eastern European countries where the political use of the past played an essential role in the development of political pluralism and of civil society. Moreover, the reality of a profoundly un-assumed communist past generated a deep feeling of frustration. This remains true even despite the presence of public gestures along the path of overcoming earlier state politics of amnesia, such as the presidential condemnation of the communist regime in 2006². Even as the Romanian state admitted the crimes of the former dictatorship, the absence of coherent policies toward the past only augment preexisting resentment or nostalgia. We can also notice an exacerbation of the initial frustration coming from the great expectations fueled by the revolutionary form of the regime change. These expectations were unmet by the political power after 1990, due to continuities at the level of elites, state institutions, the judiciary, or the military. However, the question that I am asking is whether the Romanian case can be a paradigmatic example, which illustrates certain characteristics of post-communist democratization that maybe manifested themselves in other countries, but at a lower intensity or in a more diluted fashion.

¹ On this issue see John GLEDHILL, "Integrating the Past: Regional Integration and Historical Reckoning in Central and Eastern Europe", *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 39, no. 4, July 2011, pp. 481-506 and Raluca GROSESCU, Raluca URSACHI, *Justiția penală de tranziție...cit.*, pp. 68-106.

² See also Cosmina TĂNĂSOIU, "The Tismăneanu Report: Romania Revisits Its Past", *Problems of Post-communism*, July-August 2007, pp. 60-69.

It is already commonly agreed in the scholarly literature that one should take into consideration the specific nature of the local dictatorial regime in order to understand some of the specifics of various countries after 1989. In some cases, including the Romanian one, the transition to the rule of law was done without a radical reform of the judicial system. More often than not, one of the reasons behind such continuity was exactly the intention of avoiding the possibility of judging the crimes of former regime and of postponing indefinitely the act of truth-telling¹ in relation to the past.

At the same time, one cannot overlook the instrumental nature of the position adopted by political elites toward the communist past throughout Eastern Europe. The most obvious proof for this state of facts is the failure to enforce the laws aimed at the removal of communism or at dealing with the traumas of state socialism. The implementation of such policies was avoided even by the leaders and the parties claiming to be anti-communist². I believe that this phenomenon can also be tied to the issue of representation that is arising every time the past is invoked. More than twenty years after 1989, it has become increasingly difficult to say who represents whom in terms of the relationship between political actors and the partisans of pro-active politics of memory. However, one should wonder whether even back in the 1990s it is clear enough how representation based on attitudes toward the past was as clear as we have grown to believe. It is doubtful that even then there was no direct representational connection between the social and the political dimensions constructed upon the cleavage about the communist past³. The two dimensions did exist, but a clear cut connection between them is debatable.

All things considered, the last statement does not mean that the memory of the communist past was any less valuable in transitional dynamics. As I mentioned earlier, political and civic identities have been built on memory as a pillar of individual and collective significations. It does allow us, nevertheless, to reassess the extent to which this process, which also included turning the victims into instruments in political and cultural struggles, had positive effects not only on what some people called "the trial of communism", but on the pace of democratization as well.

I therefore argue that only by starting from revisiting our understanding of the evolution of the issue of representativeness can we properly understand the failure to enforce a politically acknowledged judicial amnesty instead of a de facto one. This type of de facto amnesty does indeed have a rather inconspicuous nature, but it is also fairly obvious, thus producing social frustration. It also erodes the credibility of the state and of political parties, which, in spite of their anti-communist discourse, have been heavily involved in preserving de facto amnesty of the communist past⁴.

What one should not forget though is that the rift over memory gave the former communist parties the opportunity to reinvent themselves. Subsequently, these parties

¹ Priscilla B. HAYNER, *Unspeakable Truths: Facing the Challenge of Truth Commissions*, Routledge, New York, 2002.

² Alexandru GUSSI, *La Roumanie face à son passé communiste...*cit., pp. 213-228.

³ See also Daniel-Louis SEILER, "Peut-on appliquer les clivages de Rokkan à l'Europe centrale ?", in Jean-Michel DE WAELE (ed.), *Partis politiques et démocratie en Europe centrale et orientale*, Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles, Bruxelles, 2002, pp. 115-144.

⁴ The fact that they disappeared, as was the case with the Romanian Democratic Convention and with the National Peasant Christian Democratic Party, raises the issue of pluralism and of the democratic process being reversible, as long as other parties do not take over their message in favor of the development of civil society.

could target two large population categories. On the one hand, there was the part of the population fearing rapid changes. On the other, there was the former bureaucratic apparatus (which was defined by continuity) that still needed the political levers to block the advocacy for lustration. We can wonder whether, from this perspective, the ex-communist party was not perhaps closer to that part of society they claim to represent from the point of view of their attitude towards the communist past than the anti-communist parties from their electorate. And this raises questions about the resources and the importance of the anti-communist political culture in post-1989 Eastern Europe.

From this perspective, the Romanian case is interesting because it presents us with a clear split, after 1996, between the instrumental-political dimension, represented by political parties in the Democratic Convention, which won the parliamentary and presidential elections in November that year, and civil society organizations, some of which were part of the Convention (e.g., the Civic Alliance and the Association of Former Political Prisoners). Soon after the Democratic Convention got into power, the civic elements denounced the divorce between the anti-communist discourse and the practice of governing. In this sense, one can identify two types of anti-communism: the one that turns the past into an instrument used to achieve political goals, and the one that wants to use political power in order to implement certain policies of memory¹. The failure of the latter, despite the fact that it managed to have a significant impact on shaping democratic political cultures in the countries of the former socialist bloc, was important both for "freeing" anti-communist parties from their social base and for understanding the role of the state institutions that we constructed after the collapse of communist regimes.

The phenomenon of opposition in Romania developed in the first seven years of post-communism is based on the confusion at the core of the anti-communist discourse between challenging the party in power (NSF, SDPR) and condemning the continuity of the state with its communist past. After this period, the anti-communist discourse in the civic and political sphere became the main anti-legitimacy discourse aimed against all political powers, a discourse that was at once pro-democratic and de-legitimizing for the new regime, and the institutions of the state overall. The importance of this discourse is shown by the very fact that it pushes the body politic to form the Commission for the Analysis of the Crimes of Communism in Romania.

The cleavage over the past is not only a political and social one. It is also a rift at the level of state institutions, which remains profoundly marked by the totalitarian pattern. Beyond the political leadership, the majority of post-communist states went through a period of denial of the past. At the time, the state was organized like a fortress in order to resist the assault of the anti-communist actors. Telling the truth about the past was presented and perceived as a threat against the *national interest* as it was defined by the very state structures that invoked it². It is no surprise then that some post-communist states, such as Romania or Bulgaria (not to mention Russia or other ex-Soviet states), produced and encouraged a political culture that ignored the challenge of the totalitarian past. From this point of view, in many cases, the post-

¹ Alexandru GUSSI, *La Roumanie face à son passé communiste...cit.*, pp. 201-212.

² See IDEM, "Construction et usages politiques d'un lieu de mémoire. La Place de l'Université de Bucarest", *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review*, vol. II, no. 4, 2002, pp. 1057-1091.

communist state was not neutral, and therefore it could not provide a coherent policy of memory. Instead, it preferred to encourage oblivion in order to ensure continuity. The logic of the state-fortress transformed even the imperative of a judiciary independent from political parties into a legal system that cannot guarantee the rule of law.

Under these circumstances, it becomes obvious that as long as the cleavage over the communist past remains a central issue of social and political dissent, the notion of truth remains politically contingent. Moreover, the struggle for the recovery of traumatized memory and for the condemnation of the crimes of communist regime remained trapped into an endless loop of de facto amnesty. At the same time, as long as important political actors identify with continuities of the totalitarian state into the present post-communist states, and as long as these continuities are noticeable and regarded as illegitimate by a part of society, telling the truth as part of a neutral discourse will not be credible or perceived as legitimate. Within such arrangement, the memory of the communist past will remain a potential weapon against the democratic legitimacy of the ex-communist states.

Conclusion

In the present article I analyzed how the state can tell the truth in Eastern Europe, and the conditions for the politics of memory to become neutral as the resilience of a cleavage about the communist past both in the political sphere and within society. These questions can hardly be considered rhetorical. I argue that the answer can be found in revisiting our established perceptions about the part played by the communist past over the last two decades of democratization. The split caused by the memory of the pre-1989 dictatorships lays at the core the new democratic states, while the attitude towards the communist past remains the identity principle of many political parties competing for electoral and structural dominance. This situation cannot be reconciled with the affirmation of the impartial liberal state. In the rare moments when the institutions of the state want a non-partisan form of condemnation of the totalitarian past, as in 2006 Romania, it is still regarded by society as an ideological projection of a group of interests, not of the society as a whole.

The post-communist state does indeed preserve in its relationship with the citizenry something of the systemic attitudes from before 1989. The state is not acknowledged as a neutral actor on the political scene. This genuine difficulty of present day liberal democracies in Eastern Europe, though sometimes exaggerated at the level of the public opinion, is mainly the result of the absence of a consensus on the nature and role of the past in the current political and social establishment.

In addition, we have concentrated on those dimensions of Romania's case which may make it significant for several states in the former communist bloc, the ones where we can talk about a significant continuity at the level of state structures. In Romania's case, we can conclude that there are two distinct pairs of competing narratives of the communist past. One pair is that produced by some state institutions and the political elite, the other one is the product of civil society. The great difference between them has to do with the fact that, on one hand, the former have in common the fact that they are attempts at legitimacy for the state and the present political regime, by either condemning the crimes of communism or by attempting to grant different value to some portion of the past. On the other hand, the second pair of narratives, produced

by society, uses either an anti-communist discourse or forms of nostalgia in order to challenge the legitimacy of the post-communist state and of the present political regime. This is therefore a remarkable phenomenon by which the classical conflict between the positive and negative perspectives of the recent past is substituted by a conflict revolving around the post-communist state and the transition regime. The positive or negative attitude towards the past thus becomes secondary, and the central position is taken by the role that the discourse about the past has in granting or removing legitimacy to the political regime and its institutions.